

Interview with CAPT Darby Reynolds, Nurse Corps, USN, (Ret.) , by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, and CAPT Patricia Collins, NC, USNR, 27 April 1998. CAPT Reynolds had duty in Vietnam and received the Purple Heart for wounds incurred in the bombing of the Brink Barracks.

Where are you from?

Right here in Dover, New Hampshire. I started off here and came back. I went to Dover grammar school and high school and then I went to St. Anselm's College in Manchester, NH. There I received a bachelor of science degree in nursing.

Did you decide early on that you wanted to be a nurse?

Yes, I did. I had an aunt who was a nurse. Of course, in those days, you didn't have a lot of choices for a female. You could be a school teacher or secretary, but I was always leaning toward the health profession. I worked a couple of summers at the hospital here in Dover as a volunteer.

When did you first learn about the Navy Nurse Corps?

When it was getting close to graduation, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. And the recruiters were coming around to the schools. I had an interest in the military having read different books while growing up like *Cherry Ames*, etc. I got my classmates together and said, "Let's have the recruiters come in--the three services." They told us about the Navy and the Army and Air Force. I was impressed with the Navy recruiter. At that point, I made my application and talked one of my college classmates into coming in on the buddy system but at the last minute she changed her mind. And I changed my mind also because I didn't want to go in by myself. The recruiter from Boston decided she wasn't going to let me go because she had someone drive up from Boston and take me back down there to have my physical and all. So, I got hooked.

When did you join.

I graduated in 1961. I started my application and didn't go to Newport for officer indoctrination until January '62.

When you signed the papers, had you thought about the Navy as a career or were you planning to try it out for a few years?

I planned on going in for about 2 years. My aunt was in public health nursing and I thought the Navy would give me some experience.

Where was your first assignment?

Pensacola, FL.

Could you describe the indoctrination at Newport?

It was for 8 weeks. We were two to a room in the barracks. We had marching and all the different subjects. I remember one class where we learned to identify the different aircraft. I thought, "What good is this for nurses?" We had a little bit of everything.

Do you remember your first day at Pensacola?

I remember checking in at the BOQ and, being from the northeast, the weather was a big change. I ended up working up on surgical ward for quite a while. While I was there they had a flu epidemic at Camp Lejeune so they send me TAD up for that. Then I received orders to go to Fort Sam Houston, TX, for the mass casualty course. CAPT [Veronica] Bulshefski was my chief nurse then. She, of course, went on to become Director of the Corps. She was instrumental in getting me orders to go to the mass casualty course. That was in November and President Kennedy had just been shot. We had to wear arm bands while we were there. I came home for Christmas leave and while there I got a special delivery letter from CAPT Bulshefski saying, "Congratulations, you have orders to Saigon." I had no idea where Saigon was.

You hadn't volunteered for that assignment, had you?

No. Not at all. I had no idea. I remember saying, "I think that's where they're burning all the Buddhists." We got the encyclopedia out and look it up on the map. That did not go well with my mother at that time to have me going on the other side of the world.

I then went back to Pensacola and had to get ready, get my shots and all that, to go to Saigon. I flew out from Travis Air Force Base on one of the transports. There were only two females on that plane going over. I remember that ride because it was so long. I was in my dress blues, and I was roasting, but couldn't get at my uniforms to change. It was a miserable trip over there.

How long were you on active duty?

A little over a year. It was probably closer to two. I got there in February of '64.

What kind of preparation did you get for that assignment? Did you get any language training?

Nothing.

What do you remember about landing in Saigon and stepping off the plane?

I remember the heat and the smell. The smell was just something that was indescribable. They rushed us right into a building so we could be debriefed. I remember CDR Ann Richman was the chief nurse in Saigon at the time. She had come out to meet me. I was a lieutenant j.g. We went through 3 or 4 days of orientation. We learned all the things we were not supposed to do in Saigon. We were never to go out alone. We were always to go in pairs. We were not to get into those cycloes--you rode in front and the driver was behind you. They could throw a grenade if they wanted to get you. Be careful going into taxicabs. We were not to go out after dark. But the big thing was going in pairs. We heard that they had a price on the heads of the medical personnel. A nurse was worth \$25 dollars and a physician was worth \$50. So they always told us to be very careful because if they got one of us and took us across the river that might be it for us.

Where was your duty station?

The Station Hospital Saigon.

What kinds of patients did you see there?

When I first arrived, we had a lot of medical and surgical patients and those from terrorist bombings. We had a lot of shrapnel, punji stick wounds, and things like that. People would be coming in from the field with these injuries.

These were mostly American personnel?

They were all American. We kept having more and more medevacs going out. The hospital itself was quite unique. It was an old apartment building with five floors. The ICU was on the first and we had one elevator which did not work half the time. There was a water purification tower on top. We had a little annex which was attached to the hospital where we kept some of the other medical patients. And there was a little area in back of the hospital where they had built the operating room. It was really just one big room divided in sections for surgeries and recovery. There were two or three tables set up there.

What was your role at the hospital?

I was the youngest at the time, a j.g. I remember when I checked in everybody was so surprised I was there because I was so junior. No one could figure out why I had been sent. You did everything, actually. I worked surgical, ICU, and medical wards, and took operating room call. There were seven of us. There was the chief nurse, the nurse anesthetist. The rest of us all rotated on nights for OR call. And that usually kept us quite busy because you never knew what was coming in.

I meant to ask you earlier, when you got your note from CAPT Bulshefski and you couldn't figure out where this place was, did you ever find out later on why you had been selected as a very junior nurse to go to Saigon?

No. I never did. I knew that CAPT Bulshefski thought highly of me and recommended that I go to that mass casualty course in Texas which at that time was unique because it was all Army. I was the only Navy person in the class. Why I was sent I don't know.

What were your living arrangements there in Saigon?

They were actually quite good. We were very fortunate. The Brink Hotel was seven stories and we had a suite on the first floor, which was really the second because the cars would park under the first floor. So technically, we were on the second floor. Four of us shared a suite of rooms. We all had our individual bedrooms, which were air conditioned. We each had a balcony... And there were two large sitting rooms, two bathrooms, and a kitchen. When we went out the door of our suite the elevator was right there which would take you up to the top of the building, which was where the restaurant, the mess, and the officers' club was. Up there they would have movies and...entertainment. Many nights the entertainment would just be sitting there. Half of it was open on the top floor and you could just watch the activity from the countryside, flares going up. And you could hear some of the bombs going off. You could get an idea in what section of the country the fighting was going on.

How did the messing arrangements work?

The food was pretty good. We also had a restaurant right across the street from us which was called Cheap Charlie's. We used to eat there many nights instead of going to the officers club. There were, of course, a lot of other restaurants close to where our quarters were so we would go out and eat in town a lot. There were restaurants on the Saigon River--the floating

restaurant. So we ate out quite a bit and tried to get used to Vietnamese food. And Thai food. I don't think anybody really lost a lot of weight.

Talking about Thai food, that reminds me that we also had about four Thai nurses at the hospital with us.

What kind of security did you have in the hotel?

It was a compound and we had a fence around it. It started out pretty open. You could come and go as you wanted but as the terrorist activity increased they did put MPs where you came into the compound. It really wasn't very secure because most anybody could get through. In fact, that's what happened when the bombing took place. Somebody drove through and the car wasn't really checked that closely. They had separated the nurses and also the physicians. None of us all lived together in the same building. In our quarters at the Brink there were four of us in our suite and then later on another nurse joined the staff and she was billeted on an upper floor. Three other more senior nurses lived about 4 miles away from us. That's where LCDR Bobbi Hovis and CDR Tweedie Searcy and CDR Ann Richman lived. We were separated in case anything should happen. That's also what they did with the physicians. None of them were all in the same building.

How close was the Brink to the Station Hospital?

I'd probably say about 6 miles or so. A car would come in the morning, would stop and pick the senior nurses up and then swing around and pick up the junior nurses, then go to the hospital. And then at the end of the shift they would take us back home. They would also pick up the nurses from Thailand that lived in another building.

Was it a van?

No. A large car because there were only three nurses on duty at a time. There were seven Navy nurses there and maybe four Thai nurses. With rotating shifts and days off, we usually had only three or four on duty at one time.

How many days a week did you work?

That depended on what was going on. We started off with 5 days and then as things progressed we worked 6 days. I think for the most part we were at 6 days during the time I was there. Later, with more casualties coming in, they did work 7 days. When I first arrived, the hospital had just been opened. The only other military hospital in country was one in Nha Trang, which was an Army hospital about 250 miles north. Between the two, depending on where the fighting was going on, we kept quite busy.

What would a typical day have been like for you from the time you got up?

You'd go and have your breakfast up at the top of the BOQ then you'd come down and the car would come and take you to the hospital. You'd get your report on the status of the patients from the night before if you were working days. Then you would do the bed baths, the medications, etc., getting the patients ready for surgery. That was pretty much the routine. One thing that does stick in my mind is meals for the patients. There was no kitchen at the hospital so the food was prepared at the BEQ, which was down the street, and they would put it on a cart. A man wheeled the cart up the street and into the hospital. For breakfast we had the dehydrated eggs and milk. You'd prepare the tray and then deliver it to the patients. With the five floors-- And since the elevator didn't usually work-- we were always running up and down the stairs with

food trays. It was a lot of extra work. Because of that elevator, we always had to keep the sicker patients on the first floor because there was no way to transport them.

You'd go on with your shift and then at 3 or 3:30 the other shift would come on and the car would pick us up and take us back home to the BOQ. Depending on what you wanted to do, you were free until the next morning. Many times we'd go out shopping because we were free to do that. We had clothes and shoes made up. A lot of times the supplies would be low in the hospital and you could just walk along the sidewalk and find a lot of the supplies and instruments you might need that never made it to the hospital.

Black market?

Oh, yes. Big black market.

Do you recall the prices on these items?

I don't remember but they were things we desperately needed. I remember one time we had a very sick patient--an orthopedic patient--and we didn't have the instruments for the surgery so we had to wait until a plane could bring the instruments down from the Army hospital in Nha Trang so we could operate. Once we finished operating we had to send the instruments back up.

So the instruments that you were supposed to get were diverted to the black market.

Oh, yes. There was a lot of that going on.

Did you ever have any close calls while wandering around the streets of Saigon?

A couple of time I had gone shopping and gotten into a cab. At the beginning, you weren't supposed to go by yourself but I did. The cab was heading across the river. We all knew a little Vietnamese at that time to tell him to stop. But we also had a price on our heads. This cab driver was taking me across the river. Many of us carried a little weapon, a knife or something. And I had to pull a knife out and tap him on the shoulder and tell him to stop so I could get out. There were other times when just getting back from the hospital was an effort because they were always having demonstrations. One time they were burning cars going to the hospital. The city was just in an uproar. There were military police riding in the car ahead of us but we got caught in the demonstration and the bullets were flying all over. We had to duck down in the car risk being hit. If we hadn't had the military police as escorts, we never would gotten out of it.

If you wanted to stay in your room and do nothing you could do that. But if you wanted to get out and see a little bit of the city, which was very beautiful, as they called it the Paris of the Orient, or you wanted to go to church on Sunday, or just meet other people, you had to go alone. You couldn't always rely on one of the other nurses being free and want to do something at the exact time you did.

How did you keep up with the news? Did you listen to the Voice of America broadcasts?

We had the newspaper and Radio Saigon. So you could hear what was happening. But I can't say that I was really into the politics of it at that point. I was junior and I guess my mind was on the patients. When there was heavy fighting in a certain area, you knew to anticipate more casualties coming in and we'd try to prepare for that.

Was there a particular day that you remember where you had so many casualties that it stood out from the other days?

We had a lot of those. You'd get a call at night, a terrorist bomb or outside the city there were so many casualties and they'd bring them in. We would get so many that everybody would be at work. You could be there for maybe 24 hours trying to get everyone settled and get them through surgery. As time went on, those times were more frequent. After the dependents left, the fighting really increased and it seemed that every other day we had medevacs going out because the hospital was so small we just couldn't handle them.

When did the dependents leave?

I can't remember exactly but I'd say around the holidays. It seems like it was halfway through my tour.

Would that have been in '65?

It was either late '64 or '65.

What kinds of wounds did you see most frequently?

Shrapnel, fragmentation. We had a few burn patients. Plane crashes.

What was beyond your scope to treat?

We could do just about anything. We did a lot of orthopedic surgeries, and some amputations. We did whatever had to be done and then we medevaced them out.

Did you send them to Clark [AFB]?

Yes. We sent them to Clark.

The big event we're leading up to is the day you yourself became the target of a terrorist. What do you remember about that day?

It was Christmas Eve. I remember that very well because Christmas is always special to people. I also remember that I had the operating room call. I guess I was the unlucky one because I remember the doctor saying "Okay, Reynolds has got the call again." We had a pool going to see what time we were all going to be called back. I was in my quarters looking out, as we had a maid and we had given her her Christmas gift. They were checking everything very closely because Bob Hope was in town and was going to have a big show. He was staying across the street from us in another BOQ. They wouldn't let the maid get out of the gate with her Christmas present. Ruth Mason had gone down. I was looking out of my room through the French glass doors. I had my face pressed up against the glass and the other nurse was down in the lobby. She was just coming in and all of a sudden the bomb went off. The door blew in and the glass broke on top of me. I thought, "Oh, boy. Hospital OR call. Here we go!" I had sneakers on and I had remembered from one of my previous times in the operating room that when standing for so many hours in sneakers, and I wanted my nurse's shoes. So in a state of shock, I went back to my room to get those. I remember a couple of fellas coming in and saying, "You've got to get out of here. The building's on fire." By the time we got out the door and downstairs, you could see the flames and smoke. Out in the little courtyard, I could really see all the damage and all the victims starting to come out.

At that point, the nurses all checked on each other to make sure we were okay. Then we started to check on all the casualties as they were coming out. When the ambulances started coming. I got into the first one and took some patients with me to go back to the hospital. I didn't realize at that time that I was bleeding. When we got to the hospital, one of the corpsman said, "Oh, you need to be sutured so I'm putting a [suture] set aside for you." He knew that before long we would be short on supplies.

And then we just went to work and took care of all the patients and got them settled. I waited till the end, until everybody was taken care of and then they sutured my leg. I remember one man in the next suite of rooms at the Brink. He was buried for several hours. They found him around midnight and brought him into the OR to try to save him but he died on the table right across from me while they were working on my leg. That was something I'll always remember. We knew him. Two men were killed in the suite next to ours.

From there, things settled down and we were trying to figure out where to put the nurses and everybody else because everyone had been displaced. They took some of the doctors and moved them out to another quarters and the four of us took over some of there's. Fran Compton, one of the other nurses who was also injured, and I went back to the Brink. It was difficult getting back through the city because everything was in an uproar. When we got there, even though the fire was out, they didn't want to let us in. But the MP's escorted us since we were on the first floor and could get to our suite relatively easy. Otherwise, they probably wouldn't have let us in the building. There were no lights. When I got to my room... One thing that really sticks in my mind was that my radio was still playing Christmas carols. That's what happened that night in December of 1964.

How many other nurses were injured besides yourself?

There were four of us. Fran Compton had ear problems. The rest of us had lacerations and concussions--the routine from bombs. I also had a cervical injury. Later on, when I was stationed at Oakland, a physician told me my problem was probably from the bombing. Later I had a cervical fusion.

You said that when the bomb went off you had your face pressed against the glass doors.

Yes, and I was very fortunate that the glass didn't penetrate and just broke--shattered and fell right down. And that's how I got the laceration on my leg.

I've seen a photograph of you all being decorated with Purple Hearts. When did that happen?

That was the first week in January.

This event in your life must have been quite a traumatic experience for someone from Dover, New Hampshire.

It certainly was beyond anything I anticipated. But terrorist attacks were something you got used to after being in Saigon for awhile. It was nothing to walk down the street and have a bomb go off in a movie theater or a restaurant. They had a club there called the Circle Sportif. It was like a country club with a swimming pool and tennis courts, and that type of thing. I know I was there a couple of times when a bomb went off outside the perimeter. I remember walking by a couple of restaurants and had gotten just far enough away, when a bomb went off. After a while, we almost got used to it. Fortunately, there weren't that many people that were injured

when they did go off, at least when I was there. As the fighting increased, there were more and more casualties. Usually, after a bomb attack, you had five or ten people injured so we were able to take care of them.

Do you think you were affected psychologically by that?

Sure, everybody was. You couldn't help it. When you saw the people you ate with in the dining room and lived with being injured or killed... It was very depressing at times.

Did you have any R&R while you were there?

Yes. We went to Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore. We were able to get out but it took a lot of planning because you always wanted to go with somebody and get all the shifts lined up. Everybody was able to get out occasionally. I was fortunate and got upcountry. I went to Dalat, which was up in the mountains. It was very beautiful scenery. That section of the country reminded me a lot of New England. We used to go up and visit with the Army nurses up in Nha Trang on the China Sea.

Did you visit the Army nurses frequently?

Yes. I remember one time just going up to Nha Trang in January of '65. The fighting had increased tremendously. They needed assistance up there so Fran Compton, who had just come back from the Philippines from her ear surgery, two of the hospital corpsmen, and I got on a plane for Nha Trang because they were just inundated with casualties. They had so many that they couldn't even give them antibiotics at one point. The nurses were all tied up in the OR and the medics could only do certain procedures. A lot of them could not give injections. I remember Fran Compton and I took our Navy corpsmen and started teaching the Army personnel how to give injections of antibiotics.

I remember the nurse's station was loaded with rifles. When we arrived up there it was in a blackout. And just getting from the airplane to the hospital we had to wait for the flares to go up so we could see where we were going. The perimeter was dug up with trenches because they thought the base was going to be overrun. Walking from the plane towards the hospital, I fell into one of the trenches and someone pulled me back out by the shoulder. That experience was a real eye-opener.

Were you ever stationed in Da Nang?

No. I never was. Da Nang had not opened yet. Neither were the hospital ships on line. That all transpired after I had been back in the States a good year.

How long were you in Saigon?

A year. I stayed a full year.

It was quite an eventful year, wasn't it?

It certainly was. It was one of the most challenging times in my entire Navy career. There are a lot of memories, good and bad.

And it all happened very early in your Navy career. What did you do for an encore?

The Navy was very good to me. I have no complaints. I had very good assignments. They sent me for my masters. But when I look back, that 1 year is one I just can't forget.

How did you get back from Vietnam?

I came back by MSTS (Military Sea Transport System).

When you got back to San Francisco, what kind of reception did you get?

I just got off the ship, got on a plane, and came back home. There was no reception at all. There was nothing negative, just nothing. It just like coming back from a trip and that was it.

What happened when you got back to New Hampshire?

They went all out for me. They gave me the key to the city and we had a party. But when I was on recruiting duty around Boston, there were so many campuses that we couldn't go on. The climate had changed so much. Remember, when I came back, it was '65 so it was still pretty early in the war.

What was it like when you first came back?

Actually, it was very difficult. I had very mixed emotions. I wanted to come back to the States but yet I knew there was so much going on and I knew I was really needed there in Saigon. When I came back, the hospital was so slow paced compared to what I was used to over there. I felt like I was in another time zone for a while.

When I came back to the States, I ended up at Naval Hospital Portsmouth, NH.

Had you requested that assignment?

I had asked to be assigned anywhere on the east coast and I ended up with orders to Camp Pendleton [CA].

That figures--typical Navy.

At that point, I said, "This is it. I'm getting out. My time's up." And it was. I was reserve and I didn't have to stay. I think I had also put down Chelsea and Bethesda, and Portsmouth, NH, as the last. I wanted to be near the family. They changed my orders and that's what I got. The pace compared to Saigon was night and day. I was there for 2 years before I went on to recruiting duty.

When you got back from Vietnam and were working at Portsmouth, were you able to talk with anyone about your experiences? How did you work it through?

There really wasn't anyone to talk to. I remember we used to have coffee breaks in the dining room with the other nurses. It was hard for them to understand what was going on there as opposed to what was happening in Portsmouth because it was so quiet. I remember getting frustrated at times because it was so quiet and you could have long coffee breaks, etc. After about 5 minutes or so, I would begin getting jittery. It was really a shock to my system. It took a long, long time.

Did they avoid asking you about Vietnam?

I can't really answer that because I'm not sure. Again, I was the junior nurse on the staff. I made lieutenant after I came to Portsmouth and most of the nurses were senior lieutenants or lieutenant commanders. There was an age difference and it was hard.

Did you have a tough time adjusting after you got back?

It took a while. Certain things would trigger responses, such as if a car backfired... Things would be perfectly quiet, and there would be a noise and then I would be off the chair and ready to go somewhere quick. I don't think anyone came back from there without having some difficult times. Christmas is a very difficult time for me just because everything that happened at that time.

Is this true even today?

Yes. It's something I just would as soon avoid if I could. Every Christmas, my memory goes back to that time.

Did your experience there made you feel older than you were with a wisdom people your own age didn't have?

I think so. You saw so much death so soon--young people. If you see a car accident or an older person who's lived a long life dies, you can accept that. But when you see all those young people coming in and dying, it had an effect.

Did you ever have a reunion with any of the nurses you served with in Vietnam?

Our group went their different ways. We were such a small group. The only ones I've really kept in touch with are Bobbi Hovis and Tweedie Searcy, who I really can't say enough about. Also Ann Richman, who was the chief nurse at that time. Those three took me under their wing. They would invite me out many times over to their BOQ for dinner and just to spend time with them. I always appreciate what they did for me.